

## **Diet, Lifestyle, Ideology: Vegetarians in Modern Beijing\***

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### **Abstract:**

The new century saw the development of a new kind of vegetarianism in Beijing. Unlike the conventional vegetarians who chose the diet out of religious belief, the new generation of vegetarians and vegans in Beijing incorporated multiple new motivations including health, environment and animal welfare which were generally imported from the 'West'. By combining the 'western' vegetarianism with local Buddhism, the ideology was well fitted into local context. Commercial entities such as vegetarian restaurants helped to raise the public's awareness of vegetarianism yet the lifestyle is still non-mainstream. It may receive mainstream acceptance by further commercialisation of vegetarianism.

**Key Words:** Vegetarian; vegan; vegetarianism; Beijing

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In 2013, *Lifeweek* published a featured article about life stories of three vegans in Beijing as part of its 'lifestyle of the year special issue'. It was not the first time vegetarianism appeared in the Chinese media, but such an in-depth article of individual vegans in mainstream media had always been rare. The vegans in the article were positive, intellectual, responsible, healthy and environmental friendly, just like any model 'western' urban middle-class would be. I am curious of this minority group. Why did they choose this lifestyle? What is their everyday life like? Is it true that vegetarianism has gained mainstream acceptance in China like the article shows? What does it say of modern Beijing?

## 1.BACKGROUND

Although vegetarian practices have been existed in different parts of the world for a long period of time (Spencer 1995; Walters & Portmess 1999; Preece 2008), the word 'vegetarian' was coined much more recently in 1840s England in the context of an era of prosperous social movements (Gregory 2007; OED Online 2014). Unlike the notion of 'homosexual' which was born within expert knowledge system then adopted by the people under its categorization (Foucault 1990), the term 'vegetarian' was an in-group product then gained general recognition from wider society. Yet, both terms provided a nucleus with which the category members being defined can in turn identify themselves. Arguably, the development of discourse is crucial in the process of the subjects' empowerment and identity formation (Foucault 1990). It is no coincidence that within decades since the word 'vegetarian' has been coined the modern vegetarian movement – featuring organizations, publications and various collective social activities – has spread to other European countries and the US along with the newly coined word and its derivations (Gregory 2007). Further development of vegetarian discourse in the form of systematic writing of a monograph on the history of vegetarian/vegetarianism appeared later than the flourish of the vegetarian movement. Spencer's (1995) chronological writing on the world history of vegetarianism from the omnivorous but largely plant-based diet of hominids in pre-history to the social movement against large scale meat industry in the 20th century is among the pioneering publications on this subject. On the one hand, via these writings, fragmented facts and ideas scattered in time and space are weaved into a logical continuum, a historical context which the contemporary common vegetarians could refer to and were supported by. On the other hand, things that could not be easily fitted into this framework were largely ignored, leaving behind a discourse of almost exclusively Western<sup>1</sup> tradition. Similarly, academic research on vegetarian/vegetarianism started in the second half of the 20th century has been mainly focused on European and North American countries. For example, Ruby's (2012) rather comprehensive review of literature on vegetarian study from the field of social sciences only consists of English-written literature concerning issues mostly in English-

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<sup>1</sup> West here refers to European countries and other English speaking countries in North America and Oceania.

speaking countries. However, Ruby's work summarizes basic themes in recent research on vegetarian(ism) such as vegetarian's motivations, vegetarianism and gender, differences between vegetarians and omnivores in terms of social attitudes and worldviews, etc. and provides a referential framework for future update.

While social sciences studies of vegetarianism in Western tradition mainly fall in the disciplines of sociology and social psychology (Ruby 2012), 'oriental' vegetarianism, if it may be called that, remains a topic of anthropology, such as Donner's (2008) research on the identification of middle-class wives in Calcutta and Mookherjee's (2008) study of place making through food practices in West Bengal and Bangladesh. These studies treat 'oriental' vegetarianism as an independent phenomenon to vegetarianism elsewhere and do not indicate whether the population under study is aware of any other kind of vegetarianism in other parts of the world. Even if we accept the idea that vegetarianism in different regions may have been following different paths, it is worth making comparison and making sense of the presence/absence of communication between different vegetarian traditions.

In China, a vegetarian diet has been traditionally related to religious practice, especially Buddhism (Mahayana). However, the institutionalised relationship between a vegetarian diet and Buddhism only began when Emperor Wu of the Liang (AD 464–549), a devout Buddhist, forbade meat-eating and drinking alcohol among the monks and nuns with state power (Li 2007). Xia (2006) proposes that the Southern Dynasty (AD 420–589) was a critical period in the localization of Buddhism in China, one example of which was the trending integration of Buddhist vegetarianism and Confucianism's appreciation of a simple meatless diet among intellectuals as they embraced the imported religion. No significant vegetarianism arguments had been developed since then until the early 20th century. When Zhangfu Yang published a booklet in 1921 claiming the benefits brought by vegetarian diet, he used scientific terminology only recently known to Chinese intellectuals, in his claims such as eating meat might cause epidemic diseases, or vegetables are rich in vitamins (Yang 1921). However, this new idea had little resonance with the impoverished population torn by war and political movements and was soon forgotten until it was rediscovered decades later. In 2000, news coverage reported there were 'new vegetarians' in China who adopted the diet out of elegant taste (as opposed to the often deemed kitsch flaunt of meat devouring) and a pursuit of health instead of religious concerns (Zheng 2000). Since then there have been a few articles on vegetarianism in China, yet the majority of them are either brief descriptions of the ethical and health concerns of vegetarianism in general (e.g. Luo 2012; Xi 2011) or Buddhist vegetarianism in particular (e.g. Li 2007; Xia 2006). Unlike the vegetarian studies of Europe and North America, there has been little interest in empirical studies of vegetarian(ism) among Chinese social scientists.

Despite of the seemingly indifference to vegetarianism theories, vegetarian practices have been well accepted and incorporated into Chinese cuisine, which are reflected in recipes and food

writers' records of vegetarian restaurants. For instance, *Shanjia Qinggong*, a recipe book from Song Dynasty recorded many popular vegetarian dishes at that time, including fake meat dishes (Chen 1985). Facts of vegetarian restaurants, especially the ones in Beijing, will be mentioned later in this paper.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Ethnographic data in this paper are part of the data collected during my fieldwork in Beijing between the middle of December, 2014 and early March, 2015. Qualitative methods –interview, focus group and participant observation – were adopted in order to collect detailed, in-depth information. Qualitative analysis alone is used because of the lack of any official statistics of the vegetarian population in Beijing.

I chose Beijing as the fieldwork site mainly for two reasons. First, as one of the major cities in China<sup>2</sup>, Beijing is renowned for its cultural diversity and accompanied consumption of cultural diversity. This is a feature Beijing shares with other metropolises in the contemporary world, a remarkable sign of the fact that large cities have been taking a central role in promoting a surging cultural economy, namely generating and distributing products heavily imbued with cultural or symbolic content (Scott 1997; 2001). It is in big cities like Beijing that congregations of individuals following newly emerged and non-mainstream life-styles such as non-religion-based vegetarianism/veganism are possible which means I have a better chance in finding enough participants. The second and a more personal reason is that Beijing is the city I am more familiar with compared to other major cities in China. I had lived in Beijing between 2009 and 2012 as a full-time student. During that time I gradually learnt, though very roughly, the history of the city and the changes of its cultural and economic geography. In addition, many of my old acquaintances from that time are still living in Beijing. Therefore, by choosing Beijing as my primary fieldwork site, I had the advantage of using my local knowledge and recruiting subjects via my existing contacts. Indeed, it is not uncommon that researchers conduct fieldwork in places and among individuals they already have a degree of knowledge (Peirano 1998). Thanks to the unprecedented mobility of information and individuals today, it is also not uncommon that researchers find the experiences and activities of subjects may extend well beyond the boundaries the researcher initially defined for the field (Amit 2000). As the following chapters will show, the impacts received by and which emanated from vegetarians/vegans in Beijing often crossed political borders. An inquiry into vegetarianism/veganism in Beijing therefore transcends endemism and taps into a wider, more complex network.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Sixth National Population Census, Beijing had a resident population of about 19,612,000 in 2010, which made it the third biggest city in China. More data can be found at <http://www.bjstats.gov.cn/> (Accessed: 10 November 2015).

Not only vegetarian (including vegan) but also non-vegetarian participants were recruited for the sake of comparison. Anyone who counted as member of resident population in Beijing met the criterion of being a participant. For recruiting non-vegetarian participants, I used snowball sampling. I chose this method out of its efficiency for recruiting members of geographically scattered minority or stigmatized population (Beardsworth & Keil 1992; Boyle 2007), though I am aware that snowball sampling cannot ‘produce a random, representative sample (Bernard 2006, 193)’ in large populations. I distributed my research information to existing social contacts and asked if they or anyone they knew met the criteria and might be interested in participating in my research. Once the participant was recruited, I then asked them if they might introduce other potential participant. I recruited most of the vegetarian participants by the same strategy. I also tried random sampling by sending messages to active vegetarians on social network such as Weibo which turned out to be unsuccessful. Only 2 participants were recruited in this method.

In total I recruited 17 participants for the interviews, including 12 vegetarians/vegans (8 Chinese and 3 non-Chinese) and 5 non-vegetarians. Within the 12 vegetarian/vegan interviewees 5 had a vegetarian related career. All participants mentioned in this paper are referred to by pseudonyms generated by a random baby name generator from the internet in order to protect their identity. Open-ended semi-structured interview was adopted as it ensured the interview was under control while the interviewee still had much freedom to what they said. Interviews were then transcribed in the original language, be it Mandarin or English, though quotations were translated into English in this paper if the transcription is in Mandarin.

### 3. OUTLINE OF VEGETARIANS IN BEIJING

Since the word vegetarian was coined by certain vegetarian practitioners nearly a century ago (Gregory 2007), it has been blended into public discourse, appeared in everyday life and academic writings (Ruby 2012). Though the word is used by vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike, the term is foremost coined and actively used by individuals who feel they belong to what the word refers to. Jenkins (2008) distinguishes two concepts – groups and categories – in collective identification, proposing that the two concepts sit at the two ends of the generic interactional processes, with the former emphasising the collective internal identification and the latter the external. To put it another way, group identification is always actively sought by in-group members while categorisation is processed by external agency without necessary realisation by subjects being categorised. The distinction between groups and categories indicates the often unequal power relationship in identification process. So to speak, the vegetarian in the sense of a collectivity is generically closer to the end of groups in the spectrum of all collectivities. Yet for contemporary self-claimed vegetarians as well as non-vegetarians familiar with the word, the concept of vegetarian(ism) simply pre-exists them,

waiting to be accepted, (re)interpreted and/or internalised. This process is added with extra twist for vegetarians in Beijing due to the translation of the term.

The understanding of vegetarian(ism) for vegetarians in Beijing is under the sway of a mixture of translation and local conventions. The Chinese word for a vegetarian diet is *su* (素), which traditionally refers to a meatless diet (regardless of whether containing dairy and/or eggs) or a diet meeting the Buddhist standards (in this case also written as *zhai* (斋)). When the new, non-religion-based vegetarian(ism) was introduced to China, it was translated also as *su*, yet it is different from Buddhist vegetarian with which the public in China is more familiar in terms of rationale or the range of food being covered. The International Vegetarian Union (IVU) defines vegetarianism to be ‘a diet of foods derived from plants, with **or without** dairy products, eggs and/or honey’<sup>3</sup>. Accordingly, a vegetarian is someone who adopts vegetarianism (in this case including vegans). This definition problematizes certain animal products over others, whereas a Buddhist vegetarian diet pays less attention to the distinction within animal products but emphasises the abstinence of the ‘five fetid vegetables’ (*wuhun* (五荤) or *wuxin* (五辛)) (Wang, 2010). There was no counterpart concept to vegan in Chinese, so new words were coined when the concept was introduced. The word vegan is translated either as *chunsu* (纯素), meaning ‘pure vegetarian’ or *yangesushi* (严格素食), meaning strict vegetarian. Literally the translation puts vegetarian and vegan diet into comparison and seems to suggest that one is better than the other. A more neutral word *weigen* (维根) which is the transliteration of vegan is also used sometimes.

Many vegetarians who are open to foreign resources have adopted and internalized the distinction between vegetarian and vegan. The resources could be foreign organizations and influential vegetarian writers. For instance, the definition given by IVU is verbatim quoted in Mandarin translation by the Vegetarian Society of Peking University on its website along with the categories of vegetarian practices defined by the same organization as the only authoritative explanation of the concept<sup>4</sup>. Fifty-six years old vegan Kofi told me he started avoiding meat eighteen years ago after becoming a Buddhist then learnt about the concept of vegetarian and vegan by reading writers such as Peter Singer and Tom Regan. The internet played an important role in disseminating the information of vegetarian. Twenty-eight years old vegan Marlee admitted her initial knowledge of vegetarian and vegan came entirely from the internet. She now is the director of a vegetarian(ism) promotion company. One of the company’s activities is publishing original or translated articles such as news, recipes and interviews on a daily basis via the company’s online public account. Another resource of vegetarian(ism) knowledge is more experienced vegetarians especially foreign vegetarians. Twenty-seven years

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<sup>3</sup> The definition can be found on the union’s website:  
[http://www.ivu.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=167&Itemid=242](http://www.ivu.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=167&Itemid=242) (Accessed: 11 November 2015). Interestingly, it doesn’t mention food that belongs to a category of neither plants nor animals: the fungus.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.vspku.org/> (Accessed: 15 November 2015)

old vegetarian Ziva claimed that besides a health TV programme she used to watch with her mother, she picked up the concept of vegetarian via her vegetarian schoolmates and colleagues:

I knew some vegetarians, mostly foreigners. They were quite strict. Sometimes I offered them snacks and they would ask, 'What's in it? Do you have the list of ingredients?' Little by little I realised what they did and didn't eat.

Twenty-five years old Vanessa who had only been vegan for 2 months said her knowledge on vegetarian(ism) came from the staff of an animal shelter where she had been a volunteer. The founder of the animal shelter, thirty-six years old vegan Calvin told me he initially learnt the concept from foreign vegetarian friends residing in Beijing. Therefore, Vanessa's understanding of vegetarian(ism) was to some extent descended from the foreign vegetarian friends of Calvin. Similar to Marlee's company, vegetarians like Calvin who have first-hand experience with foreign resources acted as mediators through which Western vegetarian terminologies were passed down to novice vegetarians who had no direct contact with foreign resources.<sup>5</sup>

Conventional understandings of a vegetarian diet still have a powerful influence on some Buddhist vegetarians' interpretation of their diet. Forty-six years old Klara who has been a devout Buddhist for 12 years described herself in terms of diet as:

I'm quite strict vegetarian. I don't eat Chinese chives, scallion and garlic, because they are *hun* according to Buddhism. Meat on the other hand is *xing* (腥)<sup>6</sup>.

Although Klara's definition of vegetarian is entirely based on Buddhism, she is not immune to the problematization of dairy and eggs in Western vegetarian. She claimed that she had stopped consuming milk and eggs several years ago because a monk told her not to when she was seeking medical advice in a temple:

'You should not eat eggs or drink milk', he said. He said there was a book, the title was something about health. I didn't read it. Some kind of survey report of China he said. The book says it's not good (to have eggs and milk) ...

The book she mentioned is almost certain to be T. Colin Campbell *et al.*'s *The China Study*. It was originally published in the US in 2005 by an independent publisher BenBella Books and translated into Chinese in 2006 then reprinted under another title in 2011. It is not oriented to

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<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that although all of the non-religious vegetarian participants are well aware of the existence of vegetarian(ism) in the 'west' and could easily find evidence to support their argument, the three non-Chinese vegetarian/vegan participants are less aware of vegetarian(ism) in China. None of them knew any non-religious Chinese vegetarian/vegan and were astonished when I told them there were non-religious vegetarians/vegans in Beijing.

<sup>6</sup> *Hun* and *Xing* are two types of food that should be abstained from Buddhist vegetarian diet. *Xing* usually refers to meat and sometimes eggs as well.

academic readers from the very beginning. There have been many critics of the book's methodology and conclusions since its publication (e.g. Hall 2010). However, the dissenting voice seems to be filtered out during the process of translation, which may suggest for those who totally rely on translated resources there is higher risk in receiving biased information.

Despite the difference, the definitions of vegetarian in Buddhist and Western tradition are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Take Kofi for instance, he was familiar with concepts and terminologies from both vegetarian traditions. His idea of vegetarian diet is a combination of the two: no animal products, also no *wuhun*.

Except for the vegetarians who started purely because of Buddhism, all but one of the vegetarian participants had a vegetarian career for less than 10 years. Combined with their current age, it is safe to state the non-religious-inspired vegetarian participants had mainly embraced this diet in their 20s. Also, they were the first generation of non-religious-inspired vegetarians in their families. It is not clear yet if they will raise their offspring as vegetarian since only two have children at the moment and both of them became vegetarian long after their children's birth. Three necessary conditions may account for the feasibility of the existence of this population. Firstly, the popularity of internet in China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century gives the public unprecedented access to free information across political boundaries. Though there were only 22.5 million internet users in China in 2001, in 2008 the figure had soared to 253 million and the number is still growing (Liu 2011). Despite the tightened internet censorship of Chinese government in recent years which resulted in inconvenience of information traffic (Stevenson 2007), the Chinese internet users did once enjoy relative freedom of information. Furthermore, the 'Great Firewall' is not totally unbreachable (Xiao 2011). All the non-religion-based vegetarians I interviewed have reported either using the internet as a source of information or as a platform to communicate with other vegetarians. Secondly, the compulsory basic English language education in China since the late 1970s (Hu 2005) means many of the young generation have been educated in this way have a greater advantage to the older generation in terms of reaching out to foreign resources. Some vegetarian participants actually used English words when describing their diet, showing just how they were familiar with the English expressions. Thirdly, converting to vegetarian in adulthood may have reflected the fact that they had total control over their bodies at that time due to newly gained financial independence, as many participants became vegetarian after moving away from home due to new job or university education and the influence of family was not as strong as before.

Similar to the vegetarian participants, the non-vegetarian participants' understanding of vegetarian(ism) was heavily determined by the extent of their exposure to different sources. In general, the non-religious, Western form of vegetarian(ism) is still less visible to the public than the Buddhist vegetarian in the level of everyday life. Take Beijing for example, apart from abundant religious sites, there has been Buddhist vegetarian restaurants since the late Qing



Dynasty (Zhou 1999). The connection between Buddhism and vegetarian is so well accepted for the public that the current president of the Vegetarian Society of Peking University Maison described it to be 'common sense in China'. Thirty-three years old vegetarian Kaja and twenty-eight years old non-vegetarian Ashton were both born and raised in Beijing, they admitted that when they were small children, saying someone was vegetarian was equivalent to saying someone was a devout Buddhist. Therefore, for many non-vegetarians the Buddhist vegetarian acts as the default understanding of vegetarian and other forms of vegetarian were made sense of by being compared to it, as Ashton described his understanding of vegetarian:

I think the vegetarian diet is not the same as the Buddhist vegetarian diet. The Buddhist vegetarian diet doesn't include *hun* and *xing*. Besides meat, it also excludes scallion, ginger and garlic because they belong to *xing*. The vegetarians probably only eat vegetable, including scallion, ginger and garlic.

Experiencing vegetarian in first hand, e.g. going to a vegetarian restaurant or spending time abroad where vegetarian is more visible in everyday life, has helped some non-vegetarians develop more detailed understandings of vegetarian(ism). Twenty-nine-year-old non-vegetarian Cecilia noticed the ambiguous identity of dairy and eggs in vegetarian diet after having meal in the Veggie Table, a vegan restaurant run by an American girl. Twenty-six years old non-vegetarian Savanna who has received higher education in France described how she came across the concept of vegetarian:

I think you would have more or less heard of [the word vegetarian and vegan] if you have learnt English or if you are interested in nutriology. When you go abroad, sometimes you can see the word vegan on menus.

Furthermore, she was aware of the classification within the vegetarian by inciting words such as vegans and ovo-lacto vegetarians.

On one hand, the definition and classification of vegetarian(ism) is quite clear and stable which helps maintain the collective identification of vegetarians and non-vegetarians by drawing seemingly clear boundaries. On the other hand, the practices of vegetarian are less rigid and more diverse. While detailed classifications of vegetarians according to diet are available (Beardsworth & Keil 1992; Boyle 2011), they may not be familiar to common vegetarians. Even if some vegetarians categorize themselves with a particular group, they may not eat strictly up to the standard. Studies of vegetarians in 'western' society show a wide range of diets reported by self-claimed vegetarians, from the strictest diet that only contains plant-and-fungi-derived food on the one end to occasional meat consumption on the other (Beardsworth & Keil 1991, 1992; Neale *et al.* 1993; Jabs *et al.* 1998; Barr & Chapman 2002; Boyle 2011). This is also true for my vegetarian participants. Ziva admitted eating seafood occasionally out of choice. Another vegetarian, fifty years old Codey described himself as 'contextual vegetarian', meaning he

would eat meat if he believed it was appropriate in that context. Some vegans were willing to eat food containing dairy and eggs, such as Kofi:

I'm vegan. I definitely would not eat meat, dairy or eggs when eating out. However, in fact I don't think it's completely possible. For instance, sometimes when I was out and wanted to eat something, I would buy a bread which might have [dairy and eggs]. I could do nothing about it. Giving up bread because it contains dairy and eggs, well I just can't do it.

For Buddhist vegetarians, another variability in their diet is *wuhun*. Though in general they agree a Buddhist vegetarian diet should abstain from *wuhun*, there is a lack of consensus among common Buddhists (not monks nor nuns) on what *wuhun* actually consist of. Scallion and garlic are the commonest in the list. Other potential candidates being reported are ginger<sup>7</sup>, Chinese chives, onion and coriander.

It is true that vegetarian(ism) 'is not a food practice that is rigorously defined, but is a fluid and permeable category embracing a wide range of food practices' (Willettts 1997, 117). Thanks to the flexibility, vegetarians are able to tailor the diet to their need without undermining their individual identity.

#### 4. MOTIVATIONS AND PROCESSES

Apart from religious inspiration, people convert to vegetarian(ism) for a variety of reasons. Beardsworth and Keil (1991) classified the motives reported by their UK vegetarian participants into four categories: moral/spiritual; health; gustatory; and ecological. Amongst them, a moral/spiritual motive was the most mentioned, followed by a health motive. Santos and Booth's (1996) partially replicated the previous result in their study among undergraduates in the University of Birmingham, but introduced social influence such as conformity to friends as a new factor for becoming vegetarian. Health was reported to be the primary motive in Stiles' (1998) online survey, followed by animal rights and ethics. In general, one pattern which has emerged from empirical research is that ethical and health motives are the most important in determining and maintaining a vegetarian identity (Beardsworth & Keil 1991; Neale *et al.* 1993; Santos & Booth 1996; Rozin *et al.* 1997; Jabs *et al.* 1998; Fox & Ward 2008).

Similar motivations were reported by vegetarian participants in my research. Ethical motives were the most often reported, followed by health and religious (Buddhism) motives. Only three participants reported having an ecological motive and two of which are foreigners residing in Beijing. There were two motivations being reported that are hard to categorise but can be loosely defined as concerning spiritual improvement. One participant reported turning to

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<sup>7</sup> Ginger was only reported by one non-vegetarian participant. This may be a misunderstanding as no Buddhist vegetarian participant consider it to belong to *wuhun*.

vegetarian in order to restrain desires that went beyond meeting bare necessity. Another believed a vegetarian diet was able to bring her inner peace. One participant (Vanessa) reported she was influenced by staff in an animal shelter where she had been volunteering. The shelter was run by several vegetarians and vegans. Volunteers were welcome to join the staff for lunch which was always vegan.

In terms of ethical motivations, some vegetarians objected to harming animals in general on the basis that animals, like human, are agents of feeling and acting.

I realised animals are living beings, just like us. They have emotions, feelings and moods. They love and they hate. They are all afraid of death. They have their own children. The children love their mother and their mother takes care of her children. Besides, the suffering animals have on the farm is unreasonable from the point of health, environment and nature, as the suffering is unnatural and inhuman. I thought I didn't have to hurt their lives. I didn't want to hurt their lives. I could choose not to eat them. I didn't want to eat them. So I chose to be vegan. (Marlee)

Sympathy to animal suffering of all kinds is likely to lead to veganism. All the vegan participants showed strong ethical concerns to the animal when elaborating their motivations. Yet this sympathy may also suggest that animal products may be acceptable under condition where no animal suffering is involved. For example, Kofi approved of the idea of cultured meat (meat produced from a single cell in the laboratory) because no animal would be harmed during the process.

Some vegetarians only objected industrial farming. They criticised the way animals were treated in the industry. Kaja still remembered the horror and disgust she had when watching a documentary of chickens' living conditions in a KFC owned farm. She stopped consuming chicken immediately. Codey criticised the meat produced in industrial farms as not being real meat but fake. He called it 'industrial meat', something 'looks like meat but is made of industrial farmed animal, antibiotic, hormone and pesticide residue. It's nothing similar to the meat produced in traditional ways'. Along this thought, he refused to buy 'industrial vegetables'. All the vegetables he consumed at home were from an organic farm near Beijing. Because fundamentally what he objected was industrialization, he claimed that he would not reject mutton from Inner Mongolia or yak meat from Tibet where the animals were raised in traditional ways.

Unlike the emotionally provoking ethical motives, the ecological motives revealed by the participants were told in a totally calculative way with figures and numerical facts. Using figures to justify vegetarian can be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain when vegetarianism was promoted by some vegetarian movement pioneers as a solution to effectively feed impoverished people (Gregory 2007). Whether it was for social welfare or global environment,

what these vegetarians were concerned about transcended individual feelings and experiences. These individuals believe that individual choice has impact beyond immediate context.

The majority of the informants who reported health as a motivation regarded meat and/or dairy and eggs in general as harmful to human body. Though none of my participants worked in the fields of medicine or nutrition, they judged the validity of the information they had access to (which often was not first hand) by themselves. Yet whether the unprofessional public is qualified enough in their judgement was questioned by scientists like Newton (1997). Regardless of professional knowledge, people can always judge based on their own experiences. The majority of informants reported having no negative and often positive changes in their body and mind. Only two had experienced health problems from improper implementation of a vegan diet. The positive changes included better sleep quality, more energy, more clear-headedness and less aggressiveness/impetuosity.

Instead of having a single motivation, all the vegetarian participants listed multiple motivations behind their choice. These motivations may be systematically related. Codey's ethical support for vegetarianism is inseparable from his ecological and health argument for vegetarianism. He believed the industrial farming was a violation of human health, morals and environment simultaneously. He evaluated vegetarianism as:

It's healthy; it's eco-friendly; it complies with nature. This is the rank of my motivations. From micro to macro. It's healthy, which is to say you are responsible for yourself. It's eco-friendly, which is to say you are responsible for the society. It complies with nature, which is to say you believe in something spiritual, metaphysical.

Others showed an evolution of motivations over time. This includes '(i)ssues once regarded as important may slip down the individual's personal agenda, and others once subsidiary, irrelevant or unknown may move upwards' (Beardsworth & Keil 1991, 271). Stiles (1998) claims that 'seldom are one's initial motivations for conversion to vegetarianism totally replaced by the acquisition of more important motivations, but instead are incorporated as other issues of which one was previously unaware' (Stiles 1998, 220). Reports from participants confirmed their statements. Kaja incorporated health motivation quite unexpectedly:

I became vegetarian simply because I sympathised with animal suffering. ...At first I just felt sorry for the animals so I didn't want my parents or my friends to eat meat. We quarrelled. Then I realised there was no point in quarrelling. I started to search for evidence to show how **human** can benefit from vegetarian diet, such as eating meat is bad for your heart and increase serum cholesterol level, etc. I gathered this kind of evidence then I told them having vegetarian diet was good for their body, for human body. ...I found myself accepted the argument as well. But to be honest I wouldn't have become vegetarian had it only for health reason because everybody knows meat is tasty.

Kofi found it rather natural to incorporate ethical motivation to his religious faith:

I'm a Buddhist. If you believe in Buddhism, you believe in rebirth, in the equality of all life form. You ought not to harm any life. So animal protection in the light of Buddhism is more or less the same as animal protection in the West in the form of animal rights, only that the former involves religious worldview, such as the belief of an afterlife. But in terms of protecting the living, they are more or less the same.

If Kofi was right, then Buddhism might be attractive to some ethical oriented vegetarians/vegans considering the religion's prevalence in China. In fact, three participants reported they became interested in Buddhism after converting to vegetarian, two of which first and foremost became vegetarian/vegan for ethical reasons.

As to the process of becoming vegetarians, Beardsworth and Keil (1991; 1992) proposed that although the life trajectory of every vegetarian was unique, there were however two models: a gradual one and an abrupt one. In the first model, the individual gradually reduced animal products consumption in terms of quantity and variety. This was also the more common model according to Jabs *et al.* (1998). In the second model, the individual suddenly abandoned certain animal products. In this case the conversion moment was so impressive that the vegetarian could usually recall in detail.

Both models appeared in participants' accounts. The majority of the participants took a gradual course. Yet for some, instead of having a single form of conversion process, theirs was a combination of two models. Marlee abandoned all meat and seafood immediately after she have decided to be a vegan, but it took she at least one month to abstain from dairy and eggs. Thirty-six years old vegan Calvin took over one year to gradually renounce meat and fish then one thing triggered him to stop consuming mollusc overnight:

I was told by someone that mollusc didn't have pain-sensing nerves. But one day...I was swimming in an outdoor swimming pool. Suddenly it began to rain and thunder. Many people left. But I didn't because I thought it was fun. I lied at the bottom of the pool staring at the surface. The raindrops were so big that they hit the surface as if the water was boiling in a saucepan. And I thought, if I were noodles then I would have been boiled. At first I didn't feel much, but then I thought if I were fish or prawn then this must be a horrific scene for me. After having this feeling, I thought it didn't matter if they had pain-sensing nerves. That was not something we should care about. What mattered was they didn't want to be cooked. From then on I never ate mollusc again.

Almost all the participants who experienced changes in diet during the conversion process moved from a less strict diet to a stricter one until they reached a platform where their diet remains relatively stable. It conforms to Jabs *et al.* (1998) and Barr and Chapman (2002)'s

findings that the process of becoming vegetarian/vegan usually started by decreasing red meat, then white meat such as poultry and fish, then dairy products and eggs.

Regardless of whether the participants' conversion was gradual or abrupt, or there was any remarkable turning point in their converting process, all participants were able to give logical and self-justified narratives of their vegetarian histories. These narratives in retrospect serve as stories in the sense that they provide a series of events in the logic of their story: where there is 'an initial situation, a change involving some sort of reversal, and a resolution that marks the change as significant (Culler 1997, 84)'. With the story, the whole converting process became apprehensible and meaningful to the vegetarian narrator. It also indicates the history is not fixed in respect of the way of narration. By reinterpreting the past, individuals are able to make sense of their here and now (Bourque 2006).

## 5. SOCIAL RELATIONS

Identification, whether individual or collective, exists in our ongoing relationship with others. Jenkins (2008) suggests that individual and collective identification can be understood with one model: the internal-external dialectic of identification. This model emphasises interaction, synthesis and constant reflexivity. To the vegetarians/vegans in Beijing, their identity of being a vegetarian/vegan as an individual and/or as a member of a group was established in the everyday interaction with out-group members (non-vegetarians) and in-group members (other vegetarians/vegans). In this section I will only focus on the vegetarians' immediate social relation and leave their interaction with wider society in general to the next section.

If we agree with Belasco's assertion that 'sharing food has almost magical properties in its ability to turn self-seeking individuals into a collaborative group (Belasco 2008, 19)', there is little wonder that when an individual has decided to become vegetarian, their friends and family – those the individual is most likely to share food with – are often the first social relation obstacles the novice vegetarian has to confront. Interviews on the life experiences of vegetarians in the UK and the US (Beardsworth & Keil 1991; Jabs *et al.* 2000; Roth 2005) reveal that the vegetarians' non-vegetarian family and friends often appeared worried, confused and sad when first knowing that they had become vegetarian.

Most vegetarian participants reported similar negative responses from friends and family, especially family. Family members were often worried or even angry about the vegetarian's choice, regardless of whether there was religious motivation behind the vegetarian's choice. Friends tend to but not always show less antagonism and more curiosity, probably because their food practice was less directly impacted than it of family members by the vegetarian's conversion.

The disagreement of friends and family was based on multiple reasons. Some worried the vegetarian's choice might lead to social exclusion. Maison's parents found his choice

unacceptable because they believed being vegetarian was only the early sign of him becoming a monk. Twenty-eight years old Nelson had been vegetarian for nearly seven years before he became vegan around six months ago. His mother was afraid by doing so he would lose all his friends (which did not happen).

More often, the worry was about the vegetarian's health because meat is generally considered a highly nutritious and desirable food (Fiddes 1991). Marlee's family was worried she would be malnourished under a vegan diet and became less opposed when they saw she was doing fine after adopting the diet for some time. The opposition may be more severe if the vegetarian was frail even before conversion, as Kaja accounted:

My mom said you have never been very healthy and now you want to be vegetarian, like I was seeking death. Back then both of my parents thought I was seeking death. I could never expect to persuade them to be vegetarian.

Except for the straightforward objections listed above, there may be a deeper, less obvious cause which concerns meat's symbolic meaning. In households where meat used to be enjoyed by everyone, the vegetarian's behaviour may be deemed as a betrayal to the established family traditions (Roth, 2005). Moreover, meat is widely endowed with many positive values – delicious, nutritious, a symbol of well-off life and power (Fiddes 1991). The long-term scarcity of meat in Chinese history only makes it more desirable to common people (Chang 1977). In Beijing, for example, meat was not widely available to the public until quite recently. The common household diet under the planned economy was mainly made up of coarsely processed grain and pickled vegetables (Zhang 2001). The oppressed desire for meat means once given the chance, there would be a surge in terms of meat consumption. From 1978 to 1998, the annual consumption of red meat, poultry and seafood per capita in Beijing increased from 23.68kg to 64.63kg (Wang 2005). The transformation of having little meat in diet to abundant meat literally happened within one generation. Under this circumstance, the vegetarian's choice may be seemed as particularly incomprehensible for older generations who still remember the hunger and longing for meat in the old days.

There was constant challenging, compromising and negotiating between the vegetarians and their non-vegetarian immediate social relations until some kind of equilibrium was achieved. One participant gave up vegetarianism under the pressure of family members. Others developed different strategies in order to maintain their identity. One efficient way is to take control of the household diet. Many vegetarian/vegan participants were not originally from Beijing. They either lived alone or in shared accommodations. Usually they were only responsible for their own meals, be it cooked by themselves, takeaways or food in campus canteen. By living away from their non-vegetarian family, they avoided constant conflicts over meals and enjoyed great freedom in choosing their own lifestyle. Some, like Kofi and Klara, were deeply involved in every step of meal preparation from doing groceries to cooking in their household. Thus they

could make sure there was always food they could eat even though they lived with non-vegetarian families. Kofi's wife even became vegetarian afterwards:

I didn't live with my parents and my wife was studying abroad [when I became vegetarian] so I could make my own choice. There were not many problems after my wife was back. She had been influenced by me [and became vegetarian herself].

When challenges from non-vegetarians were inevitable, some vegetarians chose to plainly state their motivations in defence of their diet, others responded with rhetoric strategies to avoid conflicts. Ziva explained her diet differently according to the individual:

Some people, not very close to me, felt it interesting and asked if I was doing it only temporarily to lose weight; some close to me tried to persuade me to eat meat otherwise I would age fast. To those I hardly met on a yearly basis I would say 'yes I'm doing it for losing weight'; to those I met more regularly I would say 'I'm religious'; to those trying to persuade me to eat meat I would say 'don't worry, I still eat eggs and drink milk'.

Unsure of what kind of response she would receive, Vanessa kept her diet a secret from her family. It was fine while she remained in Beijing, but she would inevitably stay with her family during Spring Festival:

If I just told them I'm vegan now, they will definitely be against it. It probably will be too complicated to explain to them why humans are innately vegetarian, like protein, amino acid absorption, this kind of thing. Maybe if I tell them this is about spirituality and cognition, like making the whole thing sounds rather ambiguous, it will be easier for them to accept. I think if I tell them this is my personal pursuit, they'll give me that odd look, just like when I told them I would stay in Beijing. They will say, alright, young girl, you have grown up, do what you want.

By making vegetarianism esoteric, Vanessa hoped she might avoid argument with the older generation. The latter would have to accept, perhaps unwillingly, that they were too old-fashioned to keep up with young people's behaviour.

In the end, peace comes at a price of compromise from either side. It may be the vegetarian agrees to eat meat on certain occasions, the relationship may breakdown, or the non-vegetarian accepts the vegetarian member's behaviour. The last option happened most often to the participants.



My mom became interested in Buddhism as well. Then one day she said to me, 'eating meat is so boring.' I said, 'exactly!' But she still eats a little bit of meat once a while, because it is said in *Yangshengtang*<sup>8</sup> that meat is necessary for human. (Ziva)

Since I recruited participants mainly through snowball sampling, it is unsurprising to find them connected to each other in one way or another. Interaction with other vegetarians played an important role in their collective identification. Collective identification emphasises symbolic similarity with other community members (Jenkins 2008). Though the sense of belonging does not necessarily require physical presence or even personal acknowledgment of any particular community member (Anderson 1991), the fact that these vegetarians were able to reach out to fellow members has great personal importance to them.

In addition to exchanging information with other vegetarians as discussed before, this internal social network provided support for the geographically scattered vegetarian individuals. Thanks to the prevalence of the internet, individuals that would have been isolated by geographic distance found it easier than ever to locate potential companions. Kaja said communicating with other vegetarians made her less lonely. Social media such as Weibo<sup>9</sup> and WeChat are major ways for vegetarians to meet new members and to keep everyday contact with each other. The use of WeChat is especially prominent in the communication of vegetarians. WeChat is an instant messaging app developed exclusively for smartphones. Users can exchange free text and audio messages, make audio and video calls, update status, share links, form groups and receive articles from subscribed public accounts. Launched in 2011, WeChat saw huge growth in the last four years. By 2015 over 90% of the smartphones in mainland China have installed WeChat.<sup>10</sup> In order to keep up to date, Calvin has transferred the media base of his animal shelter from Weibo to WeChat. Staff, volunteers and his personal fans constantly exchange conversations in the WeChat group. Foreign vegetarians residing in Beijing may experience extra isolation because of language barriers. They also used WeChat to connect to each other. Nelson, an Englishman who has been living in Beijing for three years, helped found the Vege Vegan BJ WeChat Group – a group initially dedicated to foreign vegetarians and vegans in Beijing – about a year ago:

When I first came here [Beijing] I didn't really know that many people... Like the first meeting we had 5 people there and 2 of them were meat eaters. One of them was someone's boyfriend, the other one came by accident. That's when we agreed to start the WeChat group. Back then there were like three people in it. Now we got the

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<sup>8</sup> A popular health promotion TV programme.

<sup>9</sup> The Chinese version of Twitter.

<sup>10</sup> Figure from CuriosityChina. The full report on WeChat users in China is available at: [http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MjM5NjExMDE2MA==&mid=205885515&idx=1&sn=0f808c90914e1c75e79169405577de25#rd](http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NjExMDE2MA==&mid=205885515&idx=1&sn=0f808c90914e1c75e79169405577de25#rd) (Accessed: 1 December 2015)

second one, like a hundred in it. I mean, I met them mainly through things like meetup and through that meeting more and more people. Friend's friends. ...It's not just going to be like vegan things. I always bump into other people. And a lot of times, when I meet people that are vegetarian or vegan, especially foreigners, they say oh we didn't know there were any other ones. So that's what keeps stuff going: to find actually there are loads and loads of people. It's often hard for people to know where to go, how to find people. So I think sometimes people just sort of feel that they are alienated and weird and are the only people in Beijing or in China. I think it's important to try to get people together. So yeah, I keep in contact with them.

While WeChat allowed vegetarians in Beijing (or technically anywhere) to congregate virtually and keep close contact with each other without registering with authority, it only has limited effects on increasing the public awareness of vegetarianism. WeChat discourages interaction between total strangers. Users can only communicate with targeted contacts. After all WeChat and other social media are only means of communication but communication itself. In general, the interaction among vegetarians in Beijing tends to be scattered and informal. Without organised movement, it seems unlikely for vegetarians to create significant impact to the society.

## 6. VEGETARIAN AS ALTERNATIVE MARKET

The lack of public awareness of vegetarianism in Beijing can be seen from a repeatedly appeared theme in vegetarian participants' accounts: the inconvenience of eating out. Options for vegetarians in non-vegetarian restaurants are often very limited. If they make specific requests, these are often ignored or misunderstood. Forty-four years old Canadian vegetarian Alvin has been living in Beijing for four years, he summarised:

I think obviously with Buddhism you have a very long history of people not eating meat. But I guess in Beijing it's more like a religious thing, I don't know. Cause if I go to a normal restaurant, it's not...obviously I'll ask them to not add meat, but often they will forget, they'll add the meat because that's how they make the dish because I don't think they get it ... I think most people are not really... It's not a common thing I think, to be a vegetarian in China. ...I'm not picky, I don't care. Like I'll pick out the meat... Cause I like the taste of meat, I just don't really want to eat it. But it doesn't bother me at all. I know a lot of vegetarians, this will really bother them. If you become strict, you'll really have a hard time in Beijing. In Beijing it's better than most other places in China. So if you go to other cities in China, you just have to be more flexible.

Marlee has lived in Beijing and New York as a vegan. She commented that compared with New York, the vegetarian options in non-vegetarian restaurants in Beijing were 'limited and

unreliable'. There was always a risk of having chicken powder, animal oil or meat broth in the dish, whereas

In New York, almost all restaurants are able to list every ingredient in a dish, which makes it easy [for vegetarians] to choose. If you tell them 'I'm vegetarian' or 'I'm vegan', they know immediately there cannot be dairy or eggs, etc. in the dish. In China people don't have that kind of knowledge of vegetarianism.

The public's general ignorance of vegetarianism not only caused inconvenience to vegetarians but also made vegetarian activists like Kofi felt being discriminated against:

In China, vegetarians are generally discriminated. Vegetarian food is unavailable in many restaurants because there is no such an idea [of vegetarianism]. The other day I was talking about my experience of booking in-flight vegetarian meal on Weibo. Many people who are well-educated, who travel a lot domestically and internationally, even some professor friends of mine, didn't know they could have vegetarian in-flight meal as long as they require. Other long-term vegetarians bring their own bread or go hungry without knowing the flight company has this kind of service. Why? Because he has always been discriminated in China, his dietary needs could not be met and he thinks it's natural. He thinks it's normal that his needs weren't met. It shocked me. ...The vegetarians' dietary needs are human rights and should be met. But no one raised this issue up and this is the result: the vegetarians' dietary needs are invisible to the catering industry. The industry hasn't realised there is a substantial niche market to be satisfied. Hence it becomes a vicious circle...

One place where vegetarians may enjoy abundant and reliable options is in a vegetarian restaurant. Recreation review website Dianping.com showed there were 133 vegetarian restaurants in Beijing by 2015<sup>11</sup>. Though it is merely a tiny fraction of restaurants in Beijing, the number has been growing. The vegetarian restaurant Klara works for is an example of this success. Opened in 2003, the restaurant moved to its current location near Tsinghua University in 2005. In 2009 it opened a branch in Chaowai SOHO, one of the busiest commercial areas in Beijing. All the food in the restaurant conforms to the standards of Buddhist vegetarianism. Though the restaurant does have some loyal vegetarian customers, it is not enough to run a successful business only because of them. According to Klara, the customers are mainly non-vegetarian university students and white collars, namely highly educated and/or have high income. She attributed the success of the restaurant to the public's interest in pursuing health. Even Kofi complained that of all the seminars of vegetarianism he organised, there were too

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<sup>11</sup> The actual number might be smaller as some restaurants were listed despite they have closed down and some non-vegetarian stores were listed only because they had *su* in their names.

few people that showed up if the topic was animal rights related and too many if the topic was about health.

Despite achieving some degree of success, vegetarian restaurants in Beijing also have problems. For instance, most vegetarian restaurants in Beijing are suited for Buddhist vegetarianism which may reinforce the public's stereotype of vegetarians being religious. In addition, over emphasising vegetarian food as a special cuisine may prevent non-vegetarian restaurants from developing vegetarian dishes. Furthermore, the prosperity of vegetarian restaurants is in sharp contrast to the lack of vegetarian options in other consumption field such as beauty and skincare, yet it also opens up possibility for new markets.

Whether it is non-vegetarians eating out in vegetarian restaurants or vegetarians asking for more vegetarian alternatives, we can see an example of how modern Beijingers express themselves through consumption. Whereas a vegetarian diet may be central to the identification of vegetarians, consuming vegetarian meals now and then also contributes to the identification of non-vegetarians, such as showing their concerns for health and/or environment or merely as a sign of sophistication: all are desirable traits conform to 'Western' mainstream values (Bisogni *et al.* 2002). The link between vegetarian food and positive mainstream values can be deeply experienced in many vegetarian restaurants in Beijing with vegetarian(ism) promoting descriptions in their menu, NGO leaflets in the background and vegetarian(ism) related workshops in store now and again, etc. The space of these restaurants become media of vegetarian(ism) representation, adaptors in the vegetarian(ism) information network. How the audience respond to the media in the form of identification indicates the possibility of reconciliation between individualisation and informalisation in a fluid, mobile world supported by mass consumption (Warde 1994; Belasco 2008) and implicates the potentiality of commercializing vegetarian(ism). The commercialisation of vegetarianism in the UK has helped to realise the mainstream availability and acceptability of vegetarian food in the 1990s (Smart 2004). Perhaps Chinese vegetarians may learn from it. It seems at least there is a niche market in Beijing in the form of vegetarian alternative commodities, not only for vegetarians but rather for the self-conscious urban middle-classes.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Even though being a vegetarian/vegan is still a rare life choice in Beijing, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian participants agreed that vegetarian(ism) has been gaining more publicity. First, the public is more tolerant to vegetarian(ism) as an individual life choice. People following a non-mainstream lifestyle such as being vegetarian are not viewed as 'freak' (Codey) anymore which is in accordance with the loosening power to ensure general conformity in modern society (Elias 2000). Second, the number of vegetarian restaurants in Beijing is increasing. Vegetarian restaurants took partial responsibility of vegetarian organisations in raising the public's awareness of vegetarian(ism) and educating the public with vegetarian(ism)

knowledge as a consequence of lack of formal, official vegetarian organisations in Beijing. On the one hand, they positively spread the idea of vegetarian(ism). On the other hand, only focusing on the area of vegetarian restaurants ignores the need of developing other vegetarian alternatives.

Compared to the conventional Buddhist vegetarians, the new generation of vegetarians and vegans in Beijing incorporated multiple new motivations like health, environment and animal welfare to support their choice. The old and new motivations are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they reinforced each other and helped each other to be better fitted in the changing local context. Moving beyond self-improvement, motivations concerning environment and animal welfare clearly show the participants' awareness of being in an inter-connected world and their individual action is going to have consequences beyond here and now: they are helping to create a more sustainable and justified society.

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